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May 7, 2010

Honorable Mayor
Mike McGinn
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Honorable Councilmember
Sally J. Clark, Chair
Committee on the Built Environment

Subject: Planning for Transit Oriented Communities

In recent years, Seattle has taken significant steps toward becoming a world leader in sustainability and livability. But, if we truly intend to become a carbon-neutral city over the next 20-30 years, then one of our first priorities must be to transform areas served by high-capacity transit into robust transit-oriented communities. These areas represent the city's best opportunity to re-focus housing and commercial uses to support a lifestyle based on walking, bicycling and transit.

During 2009, the Design Commission reviewed the City's recent neighborhood and station-area plan updates. We realize that these efforts present a strong model for outreach in diverse communities, but they don't provide the detailed visions, strategies or incentives that will be necessary to catalyze positive change. The desired outcomes do not go far enough to address local, national and global challenges, nor do they take full advantage of opportunities presented by our expanding transit system.

In its report issued last month titled *Findings & Recommendations for Future Neighborhood Plan Updates*, the Seattle Planning Commission suggested that planning tools other than neighborhood planning be used in areas where a full blown neighborhood plan is not warranted. Areas with a significant transit project were called out to be given priority in City planning efforts, and station area plans or corridor plans were the recommended tools of choice. The Design Commission strongly supports the Planning Commission's recommendations, and offers this letter as a way to build on their recommendations.

The Design Commission recommends that the City:

1. **Analyze and compare** existing conditions in transit-served neighborhoods, the state of neighborhood and station-area plans, and potential redevelopment opportunities at each location. Much of this work is complete, as a result of the Planning



Commission's Neighborhood Plan Check. The goal is to bring all transit neighborhoods to an equitable planning level.

At a minimum, neighborhoods surrounding high capacity transit should have an up-to-date community-based vision and urban design plan developed through a participatory process. The plan should clearly describe and illustrate the desired physical form for streets, sidewalks, building placement and orientation, parks and open space, etc.

2. **Determine the critical next steps** so that neighborhoods will be positioned to best leverage and respond to transit investment. Depending on the neighborhood and current level of planning, next steps would include developing a detailed urban design framework, economic analysis and market feasibility studies, traffic/transportation modeling, and infrastructure planning.
3. **Explore opportunities to leverage partnerships and pursue grant funding** through federal and regional sustainability initiatives or other programs.
4. **Schedule** planning work to correspond with the timing of transit-system expansion, anticipated redevelopment cycles, etc.
5. After detailed planning is completed, **align** design guidelines, development regulations, and the **City's administration procedures**, to ensure that the vision is nurtured and implemented.

Tools and outcomes may include, but are not limited to, sub-area plans, detailed urban design frameworks and/or form-based codes for each station area. This will pave the way for:

- Stations to become the nuclei of great places, rather than simple transit nodes.
- Redevelopment that supports the vision of each neighborhood and reinforces its history and character.
- Holistic urban design plans that not only shape private development, but also guide investments in street rights-of-way and public spaces.
- Way-finding linkages between transit and other travel modes at stations and along surrounding streets.
- Different transit technologies that are fully integrated with each other and with pedestrian and bicycle networks, maximizing the potential for these areas to lead the shift away from cars as the primary mode of travel.
- Opportunities to incorporate public art and enhanced public amenities.

Seattle has a rich history of community-based planning. However, recent station-area planning efforts, conducted largely within the context of

neighborhood plan updates, have not been substantial enough to establish strong urban design visions or to catalyze new development. Restructuring for proactive planning will help the City and its neighborhoods better attract public and private investment around transit, an initiative increasingly important at the federal level.

Now is the time for Seattle to lead. Outside of downtown, our station areas represent the best opportunity for making great 21st Century neighborhoods. By strategically investing staff and resources, the City can ensure that station-areas become unique, vibrant places that are infused with community values, but also resilient and adaptable to changing markets. We can phase capital improvements to support this initiative, spending limited dollars to where they will make the greatest impact. The City can also partner with citizens to build coalitions for effective coordination with transit agencies and to pursue grants and other funding opportunities.

The Design Commission would greatly appreciate the opportunity to discuss these ideas with you and clarify the suggestions above. Please contact Guillermo Romano, the Design Commission Executive, if you would like to schedule a meeting. Thank you for considering our perspective and for your tireless efforts to make Seattle a healthy and prosperous city for all.

Best Regards,

Mary Johnston, Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mary Johnston', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Seattle Design Commission